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ABSTRACT

A teacher of a graduate course in severe learning disabilities developed a guided self-study project designed to move her students from a vocabulary-laden understanding of disability to an understanding of their students' unique and complex ways of learning. Self-study activities included learning about one's own learning style and how that affected one's teaching style; reflecting on early learning experiences; exploring motivation problems by watching a movie that was distasteful; attempting to learn something that the participant had previously failed to learn; learning that although masks may be good coping mechanisms, they inhibit learning; becoming aware of the pervasiveness of self-deprecating statements as a coping mechanism among students with disabilities; and learning a new skill with no outside instruction from a person. These activities re-sensitized the graduate students, all of whom were teachers, to what it feels like to struggle to learn and achieve, and helped them realize there is no substitute for good teaching. One graduate student adapted some of the self-study activities for use with her eighth-grade students with learning disabilities. These students learned that it was their right and responsibility to let teachers know what accommodations they need to be successful. Some of them also realized that they had a responsibility to listen intently, ask for clarification, and develop strategies for storing and retrieving information. This should help teachers see their special education students as learners and not just "problem kids." (TD)

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Through Alice's Looking Glass:

Studying Ourselves To Learn More about Our Students

Tammy V. Abernathy and Teresa Agey

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THROUGH ALICE'S LOOKING GLASS: STUDYING OURSELVES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR STUDENTS

> "I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!" (from Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll, 1988).

The stories of Alice in Wonderland and Alice through the Looking Glass remind us of the value of reflecting on our actions as means of better understanding ourselves. As general and special educators we struggle to improve educational outcomes for all students and may feel as though we are participating in the Queen of Hearts croquet game, where the rules are ambiguous and the players are rapidly changing. Instructional strategies that are designed to give both educators and students an opportunity to reflect on their own learning actions, dispositions and challenges may provide teachers and students with the kind of essential knowledge needed to encourage the development of recently mandated self-advocacy behaviors (Van Reusen, 1998). Specifically, the more our students know and discover about themselves as learners, the less ambiguity and confusion there will be in instructional programming and IEP/ITP development.

This paper describes a collaborative project between Tammy (a teacher educator) and Teresa (a middle school special education teacher) where a professional development experience used at the university level was translated into a meaningful personal experience for the students in Teresa's middle school program. Teresa was a graduate student in Tammy's learning disabilities course. Her self-study experience in the course led her create similar experiences for her middle school students. This paper describes the learning experiences from both Tammy's (teacher educator) and Teresa's (middle school teacher) point of view and is written in chronological order. Tammy's thoughts and reflections are written in italics.

Tammy's Vision – Meaningful Professional Development for Teachers

Recent changes in accreditation standards call for teacher education programs to show evidence of K-12 student learning (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), 2000). It is this mandate that inspired this project. As a teacher educator I am often left to guess about the impact my teaching has on my student's students. Not unlike Alice struggling to get into the beautiful garden, I reflect on my choices and continue to search for learning experiences that will shape my teacher education courses, evolve into meaningful K-12 classroom practices and improve outcomes for K-12 students. Figure 1 reflects my vision for connecting graduate studies for practicing teachers and outcomes for school age students. The dotted line represents the connection I find so elusive, but worth pursuing.

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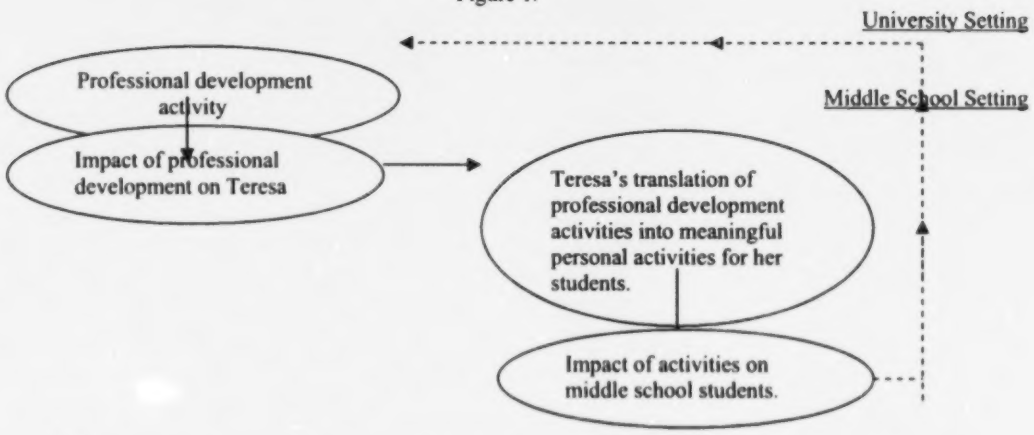
Figure 1.


University Setting
Professional development activity
Middle School Setting
Impact of professional development on Teresa
Teresa's translation of professional development activities into meaningful personal activities for her students.
Impact of activities on middle school students.

While preparing for my graduate course in severe learning disabilities I struggled to write the course description. All of my attempts were descriptions filled with jargon and vocabulary. The words sounded elegant and important, but as I reread the words it occurred to me that a class of this nature (e.g. one filled with vocabulary and definitions) would not result in a meaningful understanding of the disability. After a week of struggle and reading exams I realized that many students could accurately define terms and interpret test data, but they failed to personalize the learners they were describing. My students understood little about how they learn nor were they given opportunities to examine themselves as learners. My second realization was that my students knew even less about how their own students learned. I asked myself, "How could teachers who did not understand their own ways of learning, teach students whose ways of learning are unique and complex?" The current emphasis in special education on self-advocacy and self-determination and the legal expectations that students will, at age 14, begin to advocate for their own instructional needs concerned me. My students, who were practicing teachers, were unsure how to help their students understand their disabilities and their unique learning needs. Drawing on Schon's (1983; 1987) ideas about reflection on practice, and Munby and Russell (1993) giving "authority to experience", I decided to create a guided self-study project designed to move my students from a vocabulary-laden understanding of disability to an understanding of themselves as learners. Metaphorically, I gave my students a "looking glass" and ten adventures and waited to see what they learned. Again, wanting to impact students in schools, the ultimate goal of the self-study project was to help my students use this experience to create a "looking glass" that would result in meaningful self-study activities for their students.

Teresa's Expectations

After six years of teaching special education in a rural middle school, I decided it was time for me to further my education. I enrolled in graduate school with the goal of earning my masters degree in special education with an emphasis on learning disabilities. My goals were simple. I wanted to learn techniques for teaching students with learning disabilities, and to earn credits for re-certification. I expected to become a better teacher, but I never expected to understand my students' challenges or learn to how to help them understand their individual learning differences.

Description of a Sample of the 10 Self-study Activities for Teachers and Teresa's Impressions.

The self-study activities were designed to give my graduate students concrete experiences that targeted specific traits, characteristics and experiences of students with learning disabilities in and out of school settings. Initially, the self-studies were designed only as a complement to the course. Overtime, the self-studies became the focus of class discussions. The activities spanned the length of the semester and each varied in the length of time necessary to complete. Activities were due on a specific date so that class discussion and reflection could occur. Only a brief description of a sample (five of ten) of the activities is included in this article.*

In self-study 1 (SS-1) students engaged in learning about themselves as learners. Students completed the Learning Styles Indicator by Bernice McCarthy (1994). I selected McCarthy's work because it challenges learners to distinguish between perceiving concretely vs abstractly, and active vs reflective processing. Self-study 2

SS-8 helped me to understand the meaning behind my students' behavior. While I read the article about the masks that students wear in different situations, I recognized each of my students in their different masks. Some of them wear the class clown mask, others wear the invisibility mask, but the majority of my students wear the mask of not caring. Students wear these masks to deal with difficult situations as a way to cope. Although masks are a good coping mechanism, I realized that in order for my students to learn, the masks must come off. If they keep the masks on, they tend to focus too much on how other people see them rather than learning.

SS- 9 continued the theme of resiliency by uncovering personal situations where others expected us to fail. In SS-9 these expectations of failure were referred to as "pongs". I told my students to imagine they were playing a ping-pong game where two players are evenly matched and their rallies "ping" out a soft beat. I told them a "pong" is when one of the players gets very aggressive and slams the ball over the net into the opponent and she is defenseless to the aggressive play. A "pong" is a harmful, mean-spirited comment that hits you so hard that you are defenseless to respond. Pongs undermine our self-confidence.

In SS-9, I was asked to remember the "pongs" (e.g. mean statements or expectations of failure) that have been said to me as a child and as an adult. I can still remember the "pongs" that were used against me in junior high. I felt that as a teacher, I had some control over the "pongs" that were said in my classroom. After this self-study, I listened to how my students spoke to each other in my room. I was amazed at the number of "pongs" I heard. My students use "pongs" directed toward themselves and others as a way to cope when other students make fun of their disability. My hope is that the more my students learn about their disability the less they will use "pongs" against themselves and each other.

Finally, SS-10 emphasized the necessity of quality teaching for students with learning disabilities. This activity was designed to remind my students of the challenge of learning something new. Students were required to choose a new skill or activity they would like to learn. This study required students to teach themselves, without any direct instruction from a person. They were allowed to use books, or pictures, but the use of audio or videotape was forbidden. Students were required to demonstrate their new achievement and share their learning log during our last class.

SS-10 was a great activity for teachers. In this activity I tried to teach myself wreath-making. I bought a book that gave explicit directions, but it was written for someone who had previous experience. I needed instructions for beginners. It was difficult to teach myself a new skill. You never know if you are doing the skill correctly. No one is there to help or give feedback. It would have been easier if someone showed me how to make a wreath. Through my frustrations of having to teach myself, I was reminded that some of my students might need to be shown what to do rather than being left to read and interpret the directions on their own.

Tammy's Reflections of the Self-study as Professional Development

*When the caterpillar asked Alice, "Who are you?" she remarked that she hardly knows who she is now, but she knew who she was that morning. At the conclusion of my graduate course I was certain that the self-study project had impacted my students. What was unclear was **how** they were impacted and whether my graduate students would use the experience to enhance their teaching, or whether they would go back to their classrooms and conduct business as usual. After reading the students' work I realized that while my students could not know what it was like to be a student with a learning disability, they had reflected on the characteristics of their students through a new lens and old perceptions began to dissipate. Knowing my students could never be insiders into the world of disabilities, their writings on each self-study indicated that they were breaking down some of the barriers between themselves and their students. In a summary of the self-study experience a graduate student wrote:*

> "We are all so busy rushing to get things done and cramming information down our students throats that we forget what it is like to be that age again. This class made me take a step back and slow down. It truly made me stop and think how my students must feel in my class sometimes. Now I am wondering if I am hindering them or helping them and what I can do now to better serve them. I also learned about myself (this was scary, but important)".

Teresa's Reflections of the Self-study as Professional Development

Even though I have been a student all of my life, I have never fully understood myself as a learner. By completing Tammy's ten self-studies, I have grown to understand the importance of knowing what kind of learner I am. I also realize how important it is for my students with learning disabilities to see themselves as learners, to

elaborated on SS-1 and encouraged teachers to examine the relationship between their learning style and teaching style. McCarthy's work aligns learning styles with teaching styles; therefore, my students could see how their learning style translates into their classroom teaching. Using the results of SS-1, my graduate students were asked to redesign the course assignments, to better suit their own learning style. The goal of SS-2 was to move students beyond relying on educational jargon and vocabulary to describe how they learn. I wanted my students to generalize their understanding of how they learn by giving them an opportunity to create concrete instructional activities specific to their unique ways of learning.

A survey was constructed for SS-3, which required students to reflect on their own early learning experiences. I probed students for details about learning to read and write, ride a bike, please an adult, keep track of their belongings, and areas where they struggled. Students were encouraged to talk to siblings and parents in instances when they had no recollections.

Teresa's Reflections. The first three self-studies helped me to reflect on myself as a learner. The activities seemed simple since I only had to think of myself. When I took the learning styles inventory, the results were not surprising. I knew that I learned best in a traditional classroom with clear expectations. I was surprised to find that my learning style reflects my teaching style, and I may be teaching in a way that makes it more difficult for my students to learn. Remembering my school days in SS-3 helped me realize that most of my positive memories of school were about the relationships that I had with my teachers and coaches. Those experiences definitely influence my teaching.

The remaining self-studies gave my graduate students the opportunity to experience many of the characteristics of students with learning disabilities: specifically, poor motivation, learned helplessness, auditory perception difficulties and resiliency. SS-5 addressed motivation by asking students to view two videos, one, a favorite movie, and a second movie in a genre they find distasteful. Students were asked to document their behaviors during the self-study.

The next three self-studies helped me to better understand some of the characteristics of my students. In my undergraduate course work I learned about the characteristics of students with learning disabilities. I could recite textbook definitions of "lack of motivation", " learned helplessness", "discrepancies in auditory perception", and "resiliency" but I had never consciously experienced these challenges. In SS- 5, I rented two videos, one movie that I wanted to watch (Pretty Woman) and another that I didn't (Sphere). I watched the first movie immediately. I was not conscientious about the second movie and therefore was charged a costly late fee. Asking me to watch the second movie was like me asking my students to write a three- page paper. There was no motivation to complete the assignment. I have renewed sensitivity to motivation problems in my classroom. Motivation is more complex than I thought.

SS-6 targeted learned helplessness by having students revisit an activity that they failed at earlier in their lives. After a lengthy brainstorming session, students compiled lists of activities they no longer participate in because of consistent failure. In SS-6 students were required to attempt one of these failed activities again. They were asked to attempt the study at least five times over a two-week period and to give the study their "best effort."

While trying to convince other teachers that my students were not lazy, I often introduced teachers to the term "learned helplessness." In SS-6 I was able to experience learned helplessness first hand. I had to revisit a task that I had previously failed. If it had not been for this class, I would have never attempted to do this task again, why do something that I knew I could not do? I tried once again to make greeting cards using an embossing technique. I was actually embarrassed to bring my cards to class because they were so ugly. I think my students feel the same way when they are asked to read or write. I can now understand the resistance they put up everyday when I am asking them to do something they think they cannot do.

An article by Smith (1989) used the metaphor of wearing a "mask" to describe problem behaviors of students with learning disabilities. I used this article to introduce resiliency in SS-8 and focused on the "masks" we wear to hide our lack of ability and insecurities. The article describes eighteen different masks, including, the mask of invisibility, the mask of the victim and the mask of outrageousness. My graduate students identified "masks" they wear to hide their less appealing behaviors and their motivation for wearing masks.

understand the difficulties they face, and to advocate for themselves. My students typically say they are "stupid, and can't learn". I tell them that it is not true, **but I have never helped them to understand why**. Completing the self-studies made me realize that I am in a position to help them understand how they learn, and perhaps why they learn the way they do.

Teresa's Translation of the Self-study Experience into her Practice

I decided to use a self-study experience with eight students assigned to my afternoon resource program to help them think of themselves as learners with the hope that they could begin to communicate with others about their disability. Realizing the self-study activities in Tammy's class were not developed for eighth graders, I created six self-study activities that were developmentally appropriate for eight of my students with learning disabilities. I believed some students were more ready to learn about themselves than others were but I thought they would all benefit from the experience. Below is a brief description of a sample* (four of the six) self-study activities I created for middle school students with learning disabilities.

SS-1 Learning Styles Inventory Revised. Similar to Tammy's SS-1, eight students completed the Learning Styles Indicator by McCarthy (1994). During the activity, I defined the vocabulary, read the inventory orally, and responded to individual questions. After the students compiled their individual results, we discussed the meaning of the results and the implications. We discussed how they could use the information in their general education classes. Students had typical middle school responses such as using their learning style to avoid homework, and as an opportunity to tell their teachers they talk too much. Understanding the implications of this inventory took a great deal of discussion, but was critical to the success of SS-2.

SS-2 Letters to My Teachers. SS-2 was designed to give my students an opportunity to share with their general education teachers what they had learned in SS-1. My students wrote letters to their teachers explaining their learning style and offering accommodation suggestions that could be used to help them be more successful. Many of their letters were similar. They all mentioned that more time and advance organizers for notes would help them. Most students wanted more time to think about the information given in class. They wrote about how it was difficult for them to understand something immediately, but if it was reviewed several times in class, they could eventually understand it. Interestingly all of my students asked their teachers not to write on the board or overhead in red because it was more difficult to read. They also asked their teachers to talk slower, to use more hands-on activities in class, and to give directions in smaller steps. It was exciting to see my students articulate their needs. I believe this is an important first step in developing self-advocacy skills.

SS-3 Teaching Yourself a New Skill. SS-3 was a modification of Tammy's SS-10. In this activity, I gave each student written directions on how to fold a paper bird. Students were given one sheet of paper and told to sit somewhere in the room where they could not see anyone else. Further, they could not ask anyone for help. I observed as my students attempted this project. After five minutes, the activity was no longer fun for them. I heard them say, " This is stupid," "I can't do this", and "Do we have to do this?" After 15 minutes, we discussed why it was difficult to learn something without a teacher. They mentioned that it would have been helpful if I had demonstrated how to fold a paper bird or if I allowed them to work with a partner. We discussed how this experience could help them to be more successful in general education classes. They talked about how not listening in class, not paying attention and not asking questions would cause them to teach themselves the material on their own time. They also mentioned that directions can be confusing, and if they do not ask for help, they are just guessing and might not be doing an assignment correctly. I found these comments promising. If my students could articulate how they could make learning easier in this simulated activity, then perhaps they could recognize the value of behaviors such as asking for help in their general education classes.

SS-6 How I think. For this activity, students drew a picture of what they visualize happens to information in their brain when they are trying to remember or learn something new. The pictures ranged from a circle with a light bulb in the center to a head with arrows about where thoughts go and how to get them out. In another interesting picture, a student drew boxes for storing information on different subjects such as math and English. He recognized that it was easier to remember things when his thinking was organized. He already understood the concept of organizing a retrieval system. After the drawings were complete, we discussed their pictures. One student's picture revealed that he did not process what his teachers were saying. In most classes he only heard "Can I help you?" and "Let's go home". He identified all other sounds as "blah, blah, blah". Based on what I learned in SS-6 I focused my teaching on helping my students to develop their own strategies to store and retrieve information.

Teresa's Reflections

By creating my own self-study project I was able to help my students to see themselves as learners. It helped my students begin to understand behaviors associated with their disability. I anticipated that this experience would help them to begin to self-advocate. I was impressed that some of the students were able to study themselves. The major benefit of this project was that all of my students learned that it was their right and responsibility to let teachers know what accommodations they need to be successful. Some students also realized they have a responsibility in the learning process. Specifically, they can choose to listen intently, ask for clarification, and develop strategies for storing and retrieving information.

Our Final Thoughts

While our independent experiences with this project impacted each of us differently, we believe there are three common perceptions of the project worth noting. First, it was important to validate Tammy's vision and reassure ourselves that what happens at the university level can impact instruction in K-12 settings. Second, we agreed that the self-study experience was valuable for teachers and provided greater insight into the challenges of teaching students with learning disabilities. Finally, self-study experiences for students with learning disabilities that are facilitated by special educators may be an important tool in initiating students into their self-advocacy responsibilities.

Individuals determine the value of the self-study experience for themselves. The graduate students (all of whom were teachers) who participated in the project each favored different activities and through their own "looking glass" found different activities rewarding. However, there was consensus among the participants on three issues. First, the self-study experience helped the graduate students understand the vocabulary they used to describe students with learning disabilities. They were able to enhance their language of learning disabilities by including concrete examples that the listener, perhaps a parent or student could relate to. Second, the self-study re-sensitized a group of sophisticated learners (graduate students) who had a shared compassion for their students with learning disabilities, but who had, over time, lost their sensitivity to what it feels like to struggle to learn and achieve. Finally, the self-study experience, and SS-10 in particular, reminded the participants that, just as Alice complained about her lessons, learning can be difficult. There is no substitute for good teaching.

As was the case at the university level, the middle school students valued different experiences in the self-study activity. Teresa found two themes that permeated the students reflections on their experiences. Students believed that by knowing themselves as a learner they would have more control over their learning environments and their own behavior. They also believed that if they knew more about themselves they could tell their teachers "who they are." Knowing more about themselves as learners would help their teachers see them as a learner and not just a "problem kid."

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* Contact the first author for complete descriptions of SS activities for teachers and students.

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